1: Blackwood E-5 (1929-1930) 1935
ON6 Buka ON6
Kurtatchi

INTRODUCTION

101 THE people whose lives are described in this book are the
●131 Melanesian inhabitants of the island of Buka and of the north coast of the island of Bougainville, separated by the narrow strip of turbulent water known as Buka Passage. These two, the most north-westerly of the Solomon Islands, have since 1920 formed part of the Mandated Territory of New Guinea. The locality was chosen as likely to afford me an opportunity of studying native life under relatively primitive conditions.

114 On September 28, 1929, I began work at Petats, a coral islet off
177 the west coast of Buka, which had been recommended as a suitable starting-point for my inquiry. I soon realized, however, that the people of Buka as a whole, and of Petats in particular, had already come under the influence of the white man to such an extent that
[198] much of their original mode of life had disappeared. As they
18 themselves put it, speaking in pidgin-English: 'White man he capsize altogether something belong before.' It is true that the investigation of an erstwhile savage society is a most important part of present-day anthropology, but I had been instructed to study a primitive community. A journey round Buka proved that little was to be gained by moving to any of the villages there. Meanwhile, I had made the acquaintance of Mrs. Hadden, the daughter of the anthropologist R. Parkinson, author of *Dreissig Jahre in der Südsee*. At her suggestion I accepted an invitation from Pinari, the local headman, to come and stay at Kurtatchi, a village on the north coast of Bougainville, about ten miles east of Buka Passage. After a preliminary visit, I settled there on January 1, 1930. Owing partly to its being less easily accessible, and partly to the conservatism of its people, I found at Kurtatchi conditions approximating somewhat more closely to what they had been before the coming of the white man, though, as will be evident from my report, far from being unchanged. The bulk of my information was obtained at this village, which was my home for nine months; the villages of Tabut and Ruri, on either side of it, providing valuable additional and corroborative data.

114 The following somewhat personal notes on the manner in which I lived and worked are given in order to make quite clear the

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I

THE COUNTRY AND THE PEOPLE

ALTHOUGH the French navigator, Bougainville, discovered the island which bears his name in 1768, and also sailed up the coast of Buka, the north-western end of the long chain of the Solomon Islands seems to have been left more or less to itself long after the south-eastern portion of the archipelago was beginning to be known. On the map illustrating Codrington's book *The Melanesians*, published in 1891, Buka is represented as an unnamed peninsula attached to the northern extremity of Bougainville. The first reference I can find to the strip of water that actually divides the island of Buka from its much larger south-eastern neighbour is that of Parkinson (1907, p. 467), who, using its German name of König Albert Strasse, says that he was the first white man to traverse it, which he did in 1886. It is hardly surprising that this strait, now called Buka Passage, was missed by the early explorers, since it is scarcely half a mile wide for most of its two miles or so of length, and is narrowest towards its eastern end, past which they seem to have sailed, probably at a respectful distance, for tides and currents are tricky hereabouts, and the reefs exceedingly dangerous.

Northwards from the western end of 'The Passage' stretches the long coral reef which skirts the western coast of Buka, at a distance of about two miles from the shore. It is marked by a line of surf at its edge, and studded with a string of tiny coral islands, of which Petats, my first place of residence, is one. Between Petats and the next island, Yamē, the reef is exposed at low tide, so that it is possible to walk from one to the other, but between Yamē and Pororan, a distance of perhaps eight or ten miles, there is a gap in the reef allowing small vessels to pass. The expanse of water between the reef and the Buka shore (locally known as 'the lagoon', though it is open at both ends) is usually calm, though short sharp storms are apt to arise suddenly. The bottom affords good anchorage, and this, combined with the fact that the hills of Buka stand away a little, in many places, from the coast, has led to the establishment of several coco-nut plantations on the west side of the

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133 island. On the east side there are precipitous cliffs either dropping straight to the shore or leaving just enough space on the beach for [36] a row of native huts, fronting the open sea. A reef skirts this coast also, but close inshore.

131 The island of Buka is about thirty-five miles long, and eight or 133 nine wide at the widest part, narrowing very much at both ends. 137 Its most northerly point extends almost to latitude 5° S., its longitude being 154° 40′. The interior of the southern half of the island is covered with thickly forested hills, formed of dolomitic limestone, fairly steep in places but of no great height, dotted with native villages. The northern half is flat, and its interior is used by the natives principally for their gardens, the villages here being confined to the coast. There are no rivers on the east side, but on the west the coast-line is broken by several small streams and one larger river, the Gagan, formed by the junction of two streams about a couple of miles from its mouth. It is lined by mangrove [136] swamps full of crocodiles, and provides the natives with abundance of river reeds to use for thatch in default of sago-palm which is rather scarce.

133 Bougainville is one of the largest of the Solomon Islands, about 160 miles in length with a width of 35–40 miles. This book is concerned with the inhabitants of its northern shore. At 'The Passage' the land is almost flat, but as one passes westwards there is a gradual rise, till about ten miles from the western end the cliffs have reached a height of perhaps 200 to 250 feet. They consist of dolo- [417] mitic limestone, dropping steeply to the sea, but climbable in many places with the aid of notched logs at the steepest parts (see Pl. 2 *a*). They are covered with vegetation wherever a crack or a crevice enables the smallest amount of soil to accumulate. A coral reef comprising many species, but largely composed of a variety of Hexacorallia,[1] lines the shore. At its outer edge great breakers crash incessantly on all but a very few days in the year, making it an exciting business to launch a canoe through the surf. Owing to the difficulty of approaching it by sea, this portion of the coast [361] offers little inducement to white settlers, and is occupied by a string of native villages, among them Kurtatchi, my head-quarters for nine months. Towards the north-eastern corner of the island

[1] For the identification of this and other geological specimens which I brought home I am indebted to Mr. C. J. Bayzand, University Demonstrator in Geology, Oxford.

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BUKA AND NORTH BOUGAINVILLE
Inset: SKETCH-MAP OF THE WESTERN PACIFIC

[End map]

CUSTOMS AND BELIEFS OF THE NATIVES OF BUKA

By GORDON THOMAS

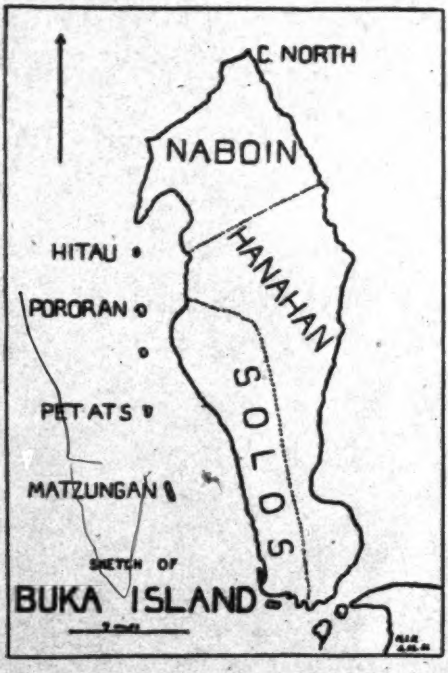
●131 BUKA is a small island, thirty miles long and ten miles wide, lying north of Bougainville and is the most northerly isle of the Solomons, though politically it is included in the Mandated Territory of New Guinea.

773 According to Buka legend the island was created when a god
823 and goddess arrived from out of the south (Bougainville) and, travelling in a *mon* (canoe) to the northward, the island of Buka arose in the wake of the *mon*. At various intervals the god threw away the husks of betel-nut which he was chewing and these, in turn, became the small islands off the west coast of Buka. While the god steered the coast line was straight; later when the goddess piloted the craft the course was crooked and hence the large harbour at the north-west end of the island. Upbraiding the goddess, the god resumed the steering and eventually arrived back at the starting point, leaving behind a straight coast line.

196 The word in the Buka language to designate a white man is *tolala* and had its origin when the first sailing ship was sighted by a Buka man standing on the beach. The huge spread of canvas appearing on the horizon seemed to the astonished native nothing more than an island approaching. Excitedly he called out: "*A tol alana mayen!* (An island is coming here!)" When it was found that white men were aboard they received the name formed by the first part of the native's cry.

881 Like most tribes of Melanesia their initiation ceremonies for youths to enter manhood are of paramount importance, and are still maintained with great secrecy, though missionary and government influence has done much to eliminate many of the more savage rites. Weeks before the ceremony the great spirit, Ndook, can be
[776] heard calling in the bush, warning the community of its advent so as to prepare pigs for his feasting. The women—particularly the

mothers and relations of youths ready for initiation—show signs of great agitation; and owners of pigs commence wondering whether they will be called upon to supply one or two porkers from their precious herd. The ceremony is conducted by the head-men of a community, and it is these men who disappear into the bush and



create the cries of Ndook by medium of the bull-roarer and another instrument consisting of a half coconut shell with a small portion of a coconut leaf stretched across the opening. This, used in a manner similar to that in which children play on a comb and paper, creates a most eerie sound. Those men whom the head-men have decided should supply pigs are warned of this by a huge stick (used for carrying trussed pigs) being mysteriously thrust through the doors of their houses at night. Refusal to obey such an edict was, and sometimes still is, punishable by death.